

Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte 1884–1886

The eighth and last of the group exhibitions initiated by the Impressionists opened on May 15, 1886. Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Caillebotte did not participate, but Cassatt, Degas, Gauguin, Guillaumin, and Morisot were among the seventeen present, as was Pissarro, his son Lucien, Signac, and Seurat. Seurat showed fewer works than the others: three drawings (cat. nos. 44, 45, and 158), one *croqueton* (cat. no. 97), and five canvases. Three canvases were from the previous summer's campaign at Grandcamp (including cat. nos. 160 and 161), and one was of the Seine at Courbevoie (cat. no. 153). Dominating them all was *Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte*, 1884, which became the most notorious picture of the exhibition. Word of it spread even to the London press, foreshadowing its eventual fame as one of the great landmarks of early modern art. Some critics passed it over in favor of works by better-known artists, such as Degas, who exhibited a controversial *Suite de nuds de femmes*, but most singled out *La Grande Jatte*. Its size, technique, and rigid figures were disconcerting; the long-tailed monkey became the butt of much humor. Nonetheless there were a number of generally favorable reviews, mostly by young naturalist critics writing for journals of the political left.

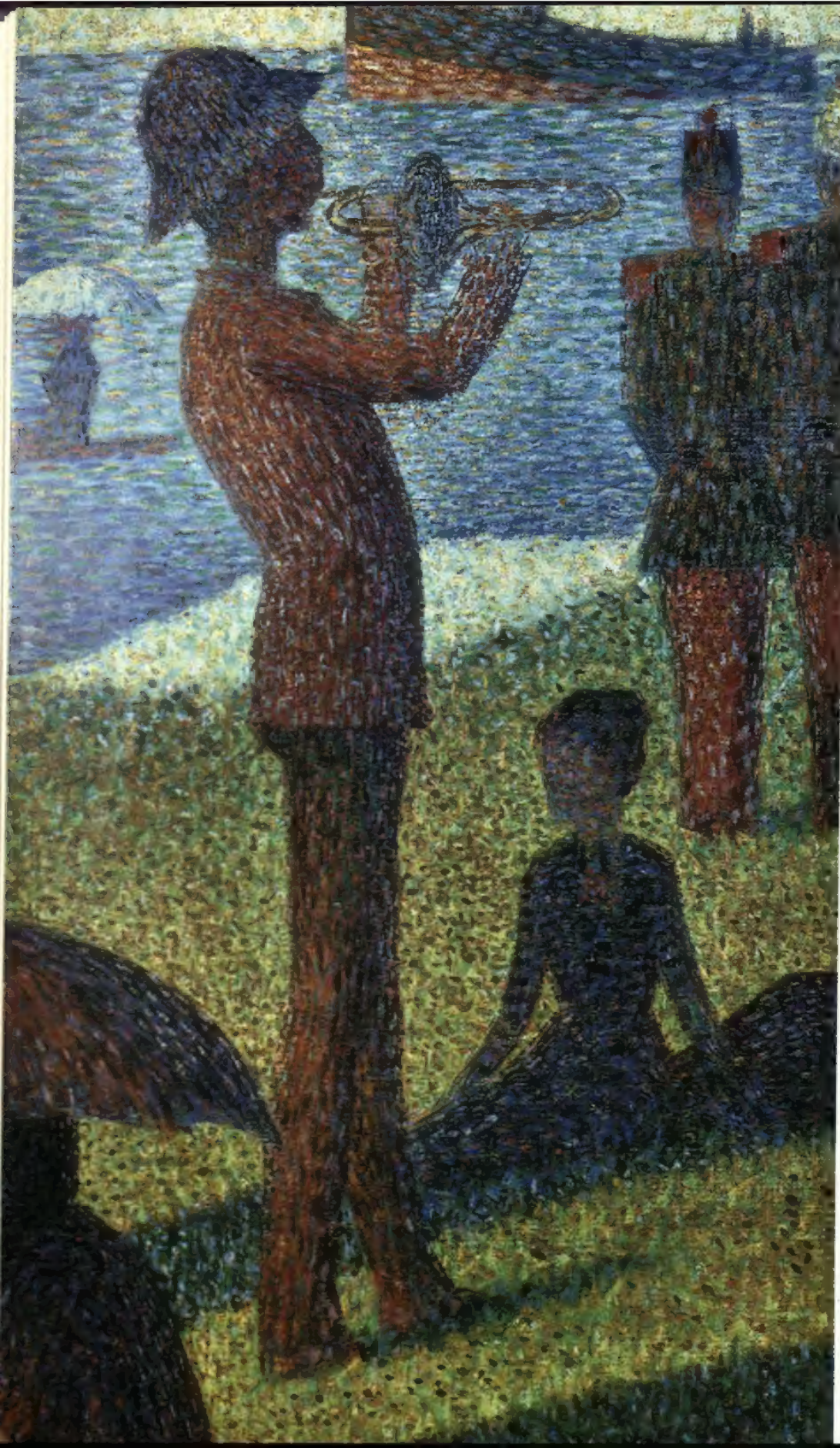
The spring exhibition alone would have established Seurat's celebrity, but in August *La Grande Jatte* appeared again, in the second exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. This time Seurat showed his large picture and a group of landscapes in a separate room, together with works by Charles Angrand, Henri-Edmond Cross, Albert Dubois-Pillet, Lucien Pissarro, and Signac. These six, plus the elder Pissarro, who did not exhibit, were baptized "néo-impressionnistes" by Félix Fénéon in his September review of the Indépendants.¹ The next month he published a brochure, *Les impressionnistes en 1886*, composed of his recent articles; in his section on Seurat's group, half of which was devoted to *La Grande Jatte*, he confirmed not only the term "néo-impressionnisme" but also Seurat's role as the movement's leader. (Fortunately, Seurat's own term, "chromo-luminarisme," never took hold.) Other reviewers distinguished *La Grande Jatte*, and an abundant literature—it was also shown in Brussels in February 1887—helped make it both the star turn of Neo-Impressionism and the most famous painting of the decade.

In his autobiographical letter to Fénéon (Appendix F), Seurat insisted that the studies for *La Grande Jatte* and the canvas itself were begun on

Seurat, *Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte*, 1884–1886.
Oil on canvas, 81 1/2 × 121 1/4 in. (207 × 308 cm.).
The Art Institute of Chicago. Helen Birch
Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224 (H 162)







Ascension Day, May 22, 1884. The painted studies were probably completed before December 1884, when he exhibited the separate landscape (cat. no. 139). In March 1885, according to his letter, the big picture was ready for exhibition with the Indépendants. That show was postponed, however, and Seurat turned to other projects, taking up the canvas again in October. He reworked it, incorporating the lessons from his summer at Grandcamp, and exhibited the picture with the Impressionists in May 1886. In reworking it he unfortunately used some unstable pigments recommended by Pissarro; just six years later his friends noted the sad results. Emerald green turned to a dull olive, and oranges to brown.² The latter, obtrusive dark spots over the sunlit grass (instead of the light orange Seurat intended), are especially disfiguring.

We can learn something about the genesis of *La Grande Jatte* from the many studies associated with it, even though we cannot arrange them in a reliable sequence. Twenty-seven drawings, twenty-seven panels, and three canvases survive that are related to the final canvas.³ Given this number, and cognizant of Seurat's "scientific" theories, historians have wanted to believe in a logical, step-by-step procedure: from drawings to panels to canvases. Most of the drawings did in fact establish the exact outlines of many of the foreground figures, but these drawings intervened late in the painting's evolution. As for the small panels, although most show the landscape arranged as it is on the canvas not all of them have the same placement of shadows, and only a few of their figures are found (often in different locations) in the finished work. Seurat was certainly a methodical worker (and the preparation of this canvas is a striking contrast with Impressionist practice), but his method was an empirical one in which he rejected as much as he retained.

In several panels he explored the park before he committed himself to his setting, including one (cat. no. 118) in which sunlight and shadow are reversed and another (cat. no. 119) in which overhead foliage and branches appear in the upper corners; the small triangle in the upper right corner of the finished picture is a curious remnant of those studies. These may have been painted before the day in May when Seurat decided on the large picture. In any event, all, or nearly all the panels were completed by that autumn.⁴ At a relatively early stage he worked out the final disposition of the landscape; with only modest variations, it is the setting for many of the little oils. He almost certainly blocked it out on the large canvas by late spring or early summer, and he took time to perfect it in the small canvas (cat. no. 139) he exhibited in December 1884.

Seurat continued his explorations. On the little panels he painted different figures in his stagelike landscape. The prominent mother and child

in the picture's center appear in several panels. The woman stands alone, without umbrella, in one (cat. no. 122); she has an umbrella in another (cat. no. 130), but her lowered hand is to our right; in another (H 119) the two figures are widely apart; and in yet another (H 124) they are together, but the child has an orange dress and they are off to the right, near the phalanx of tree trunks. In no panel do we see them as they are on the final canvas. Other individuals and groups are developed in like manner. At some point in late summer or early fall, Seurat worked out most of his composition on the medium-sized canvas now in the Metropolitan Museum (cat. no. 141). He then devoted the fall and winter to the large canvas, readied for exhibition, as we know, in March 1885. It was only in the final painting that many key features were introduced, among them the top hat and cane of the man seated to the left and the leaping dog in the lower right. Although several drawings were made to fix the ultimate forms of some of the major figures, we cannot say that this process advanced with any kind of predetermined logic; for example, none of the five drawings of monkeys listed among the studies was used for the canvas.

With the aid of the Metropolitan's oil study, we can guess at the appearance of the canvas in March 1885, before its reworking. Seurat widened the skirts of the large *promeneuse* on the right and of the fisherwoman on the other side by adding curved and scalloped outlines whose rhythms contrast with the rigid profiles of the 1885 forms. Of course, we do not know if Seurat would have regarded his composition as finished in 1885; he may have been willing to show a work in progress, with the intention of finishing it later. If we mentally subtract all the repaints that he undertook in late 1885 and in 1886, we discover a picture whose figures have an almost Egyptian aspect far more startling than their graceful successors.

The dominant fugue of the final composition, seen closely, is lightened by many grace notes: butterflies, puffs of smoke from pipe and cigar, bows, flowers, and caricatural faces, in addition to the leaping dog and the monkey. From a slight distance, however, and in the reduced scale of any reproduction, one senses the measured cadences of a geometric harmony. Through the darkened frame of foreground shadow and the foliage above we look into a brightly lit plane that rises, exposing diagonal and horizontal shadows that not only mark off receding depth like so many theater flats but also serve as pedestals for figures and trees, locking the humans into their environment. Figures are posed mostly in profile or seen from the front or back, which flattens them and adds greatly to their lack of involvement, structural and psychological, with their neighbors, even when disposed in pairs or triplets. This contrasts with a picture such as Dubourg's beach scene (p. 148), where vacationers are organized along similar

orthogonals as well as in isolated groupings, but where the figures of each pair overlap or turn to one another.

When the viewer gets as close to *La Grande Jatte* as Seurat was when he painted it, the color and brushwork appear quite varied and animated. Although it is so often stated that the surface is a screen of uniform dots, the strokes in fact vary from small dots (mostly added in the repainting of 1885–86) to long streaks. For tree trunks, the elongated dabs flow along the axis of the trunk and then change direction to move outward on the branches, as though they were the vital carriers of sap. The strokes similarly follow the imagined reality of the figures and their costumes, flowing in outward curves for bust and hips, vertically for upright torsos, and along the axes of each portion of an arm or leg as it changes direction.

Despite this actual variety of touch, from normal viewing distance the brushwork seems nearly uniform, and it is this uniformity that has always drawn attention. In the first—and still the most famous—analysis of what was already being called pointillism, Fénéon explained this effect in terms of “*mélange optique*” (optical mixture):

If, in *La Grande Jatte* of M. Seurat, one considers, for example, a square decimeter covered with a uniform tone, one finds all its constituent elements on each centimeter of this area, in a swirling crowd of slender maculae. For this greensward in shadow: most of the touches give the local color of grass; other touches, oranges, are scattered about to express the feeble solar action; still others, purples, introduce the complement of green; a cyan blue, provoked by the proximity of a patch of grass in sunlight, increases its siftings toward the line of demarcation and then thins them out progressively beyond.⁵

This passage defines the essence of Seurat's optical mixtures, which Fénéon defended by calling upon Rood's treatise (see Appendix K), firmly attaching the technique to the world of science. The association with science, however, has tended to obscure the fact that Seurat's technique grew slowly from his practice and is predominantly a feature of his craft. Although the colors do indeed vibrate in our eye, optical mixture does not really work in Seurat's painting. What we see depends not upon separate colors combining in our eye to form new ones but upon the use of broken color that Seurat had learned from Blanc and Delacroix. Underneath those multicolored strokes are several variations of the local color; this determines what we see. In the shade we see dark green grass because Seurat first broadly brushed in several different tints of green and blue-green; he then enlivened the greens with scattered smaller touches of orange, yellow, blue, purple, and red. Where two areas meet, the contrasts identified by

Chevreul take place: the light becomes even lighter and the dark darker, with corresponding changes in coloration. All these reactions among areas of color result from several years of work with pigments; to describe them Fénéon used the “scientific” terms that Seurat himself used, convincing terms because they suited other aspects of *La Grande Jatte* that spoke for methodical procedure and impersonality. What was true of Seurat was at least partly true of the other Neo-Impressionists: Camille Pissarro called his erstwhile comrades “impressionnistes romantiques,” whereas Seurat and his new associates were “impressionnistes scientifiques.”⁶

In 1886 critics again compared Seurat to that “primitive” intermediary with the grand tradition, Puvis de Chavannes, but the insistent modernism of Seurat’s technique and his contemporary subject matter separate him radically from the Lyons master. Puvis’s brushwork and pale color are precisely what Seurat had been combating since he began to paint. Pissarro, including Seurat and Signac in his statement, claimed that Puvis “is our opposite in art, whatever his talent.”⁷ Seurat, in fact, liked to think of himself as a modern-day Phidias, not because he would emulate the appearances of classical art, as Puvis did, but because he would entirely remake art, as the Greek sculptor had done in his day. Surely thinking of his *La Grande Jatte*, he told Gustave Kahn that “the Panathenaeans of Phidias formed a procession. I want to make modern people, in their essential traits, move about as they do on those friezes, and place them on canvases organized by harmonies of color, by directions of the tones in harmony with the lines, and by the directions of the lines.”⁸

Thus Seurat gave a radical twist to Blanc’s formulation. He would create a new classicism and remake Impressionism by eliminating the accidental and the momentary, preserving the vitality of life in well-calculated forms that would embody enduring ideals. It was precisely this sense of permanence that attracted young Symbolist writers to Seurat, in whom they recognized an artist who had turned his back on naturalism and Impressionism, which they had come to regard as superficial:

The spectacle of sky, of water, of verdure varies from instant to instant, so professed the first Impressionists. To imprint one of these fugitive appearances on the receiving mind, that was the goal.—From that resulted the need to seize a landscape in one sitting and a propensity to make nature grimace in order to prove that the moment was unique and that one would never see it again.

To synthesize a landscape in a definitive aspect which perpetuates its sensation, that is what the Neo-Impressionists try to do.⁹



The Lady Tuya. Egyptian, New Kingdom. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Paul Signac, *Apprêteuse et garnisseuse (modes), rue du Caire* (Trimmer and finisher [fashionable dress], rue du Caire), 1886. E. G. Bührle Foundation, Zurich

Seurat’s “classicism” (his link with Blanc and *la grande tradition*) is nonetheless marked by a pronounced “primitivism,” so much so that in his art the two concepts merge, the latter subverting and at times overwhelming the former. According to Signac, when Degas saw *La Grande Jatte*, “he said dryly to Seurat: ‘You have been in Florence, you have. You have seen the Giotto.’”¹⁰ No other contemporaries referred to Giotto, but several saw in Seurat’s canvas analogies with early Renaissance art. They articulated this in general terms (no painter was named), believing that the relative flatness and toylike elements of the painting were a return to what they also called Gothic art, that is, to quattrocento painting. We have come to accept the parallelism on a broad level; no debt to a particular quattrocento artist has proved convincing, however, despite modern historians’ comparisons of Seurat with Piero della Francesca.¹¹ A more rewarding means of analysis is to look at Seurat’s “primitivism” in relation to a number of other arts and to define it with the aid of these multiple parallels.

Several of Seurat’s critic friends compared his promenaders to figures in Egyptian art. Indeed, the seated nurse on the left has the chunkiness of an Egyptian seated scribe, and the woman in the center has the exact pose of the ubiquitous standing priestesses of the New Kingdom. Other critics

likened his figures to wooden toys, puppets, old tapestries, colored engravings, and illustrations by Kate Greenaway,¹² for he rendered his images with the emblematic clarity of a primer. Some of these writers were probably responding to the curious departures from conventional proportions first remarked upon by Meyer Schapiro.¹³ The fisherwoman is on the same plane as the central mother yet would come up only to her shoulders; the seated man in top hat, if erect, would reach only the waist of the tall *promeneuse* on the right. Equally curious are the small steamboat and racing shell that are on the same plane but patently not on the same scale. (These anomalies of proportion should have cautioned those of us who have overly insisted upon Seurat's "scientific" procedures.) Seurat, we know, collected popular broadsides in which such "primitive" features are found; a large number were discovered in his studio after his death (Appendix C). These are not "sources," but they are reflections of his interest in popular arts, an antiacademic current among artists and writers that dated to the mid-century (Courbet had been attracted to broadsides and Champfleury wrote about them). The popular arts were considered "primitive" in the sense of being original expressions of *le peuple*, untainted by official art, and therefore more democratic and more honest. Camille and Lucien Pissarro gave them a leftist political meaning; van Gogh found a Christian humility in them.

With the convenience of hindsight, we now see that *La Grande Jatte* was the first major statement of a new variant of "primitivism"; we might call it "neo-primitivism" to go with "Neo-Impressionism." Seurat was not alone in this, for one of the women in Signac's figure painting in the 1886



Camille Pissarro, *La cueillette des pommes* (Gathering apples), 1886. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan

Indépendants exhibition has a cartoonlike silhouette, and the rest of the picture has a sharp-edged and decorative flatness. Pissarro gave the women a more atmospheric treatment in his major piece for the same exhibition. They have, however, a "hieratic" stiffness, they are separated from one another, and the whole has a tapestry aspect; he referred to his current work as having "the cachet of a *modern primitive*."¹⁴ In the same year, Seurat borrowed from Gauguin an excerpt from a supposed Turkish painter's manual (Appendix P) that emphasized static poses over movement. By 1887 van Gogh, Gauguin, and Émile Bernard all showed pronounced interest in various "primitive" arts, and by the end of the decade Egyptian, medieval, early Renaissance, and folkloric arts had been taken up by the French avant-garde. Contemporary Symbolist writers amalgamated these various "primitivisms" as well.¹⁵

Such arts from the popular press as cartoon, caricature, and advertising—forms embedded in social interchange outside the boundaries of the fine arts—can all be detected in Seurat's neo-primitivism. The creators of those forms were, like Seurat, sophisticated artists who drew upon folkloric arts. In *La Grande Jatte* several details approach journalistic illustration: the hook-nosed profile of the reclining *canotier*, the silhouette of the top-hatted dandy, the cigar of the leading *promeneur*, the blast of the boor's French horn that calls the two cadets to attention. The very wit of these inventions and the amusement we derive from them takes us far from the classicism of Blanc and Puvis de Chavannes. Images from fashion display and advertising also found their way into Seurat's vocabulary. In department store advertisements for ready-to-wear clothing, bustles were commonly worn by several women, most of them viewed in profile, who were customarily placed in the setting of garden or park. This linked women with "nature" and with the places where social display was paramount, a convention to which Seurat's *Grande Jatte* adhered. The simplicity of the advertisements, partly a result of the medium of engraving, resembled the style of broadsides; their authors, however, were far from primitive and were instead consciously aiming for the clarity of an archetype to which they could affix the lineaments of their commodities. These advertisements have been linked with Seurat's *promeneuse*, sometimes with hints of influence or derivation. Seurat surely knew them, and his own drawings of women from 1881 onward charted the literal expansion of the bustle (it reached its extreme in 1885–86).

Like its predecessor *Une baignade*, *La Grande Jatte* represents a sunny day along the Seine northwest of Paris.¹⁶ In the *Baignade* naturalism took precedence, for Seurat set the leisure of lower-class males against a



Édouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

backdrop of factories to form a social content uncharacteristic of Impressionism. In *La Grande Jatte*, Impressionism displaced naturalism. In this ritual of middle-class leisure among pleasant surroundings, there are no factories and hardly a hint of work. Too radical a separation of naturalism and Impressionism, however, is unwise, because the popular content of *La Grande Jatte* has ties with both. Duranty, Degas's friend and a leading naturalist writer, virtually predicted Seurat's painting in his novel of 1872, *Le peintre Louis Martin*: one of the paintings by his protagonist, Martin, a young Impressionist, is "a rather large painting full of air, light, and verdure, with crowds of people among the trees and on the lawns, the sort who were definitely a kind of mirror of Paris."¹⁷ Zola created numerous scenes of picnics and promenades along riverbanks and in Parisian or suburban parks, and Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), shown in the 1863 Salon des Refusés (Duranty's Martin sees and admires it there), was one of the key pictures of its era. By Seurat's day promenading in public gardens was a staple subject of painting, of the illustrated press, and of poems and prose vignettes in literary journals.

Seurat's site, directly opposite that of the *Baignade*, is the park that occupied the southern tip of the elongated island. From mid-century the central two-thirds of La Grande Jatte, circumnavigated by a road, had been taken over by private dwellings, boatyards, and café-restaurants. It no

longer had the chic of the Bois de Boulogne or the Parc Monceau, for nearby were the factories of Clichy (visible in the background of the *Baignade*), and the rapidly growing communities of Clichy and Asnières. Contemporaneous guidebooks describe activities characteristic of this and other riparian shores near Paris: rowing, boating, fishing, picnicking, dining, and dancing. Seurat shows us boating and fishing as he takes us away from the cafés to the greenswards and copses, where a varied and well-mannered population whiles away the afternoon hours.

The genesis of Seurat's picture, as we have seen, involved treating the park as a stage across which a variety of persons strolled or reclined. From these "auditions" he eventually selected the performers of his Sunday ritual, combining, as it were, the functions of both playwright and director. His picture should thus be seen as an artifice, devoted to a social institution whose setting is contrived—parks are not "nature," but artificial stages for human action—and whose participants deal in the stratagems of self-presentation. Parks were ideal places for strangers to display themselves to one another without providing clues to their individual identities.¹⁸

Some recent commentators on *La Grande Jatte* have interpreted it not as a decorous Sunday promenade but as a place of encounters among prostitutes and clients; they point particularly to the couple on the right. Only one contemporaneous reviewer, however, called the woman with a monkey a *cocotte*.¹⁹ She has absolutely nothing of contemporary representations of "loose women" about her, either in gesture or in her costume, a kind widely advertised and bought by respectable middle-class women. It seems more likely that Seurat was mocking the pretentiousness of this elegant couple. In several of the small panels the woman appears by herself, so Seurat at one time thought of her as a lone promenader, courting notice with her monkey. By adding her consort he took up the theme of the promenading couple who appear in numerous contemporary illustrations and paintings. Some of these illustrations are indeed of rakes and their kept women, but in such cases the artist makes this evident by pose, gesture, and costume. In other instances, we see elegance and pretension, current costume and social parade, which is all we can be sure we see in Seurat's picture.

In the lower left a muscular boatman of brooding profile is juxtaposed with a dandified male, another figure whose pretentiousness is mocked by the artist, this time by means of his small size, formal dress, and ostentatious cane. Next to the men there is a woman rendered entirely in curves, a contrast to the angular male profiles. Above this group, a nurse sits like a boulder next to her elderly client.²⁰ Perhaps because she is the picture's one working-class figure she is the least individualized, identified solely by her costume. Her patient is characterized by an aged profile and slumping



Édouard Manet, *Jeanne, ou le Printemps*, 1881.
Private collection



A. Grévin, *J'parie qu'ça ne lui coûte pas plus d'vingt-cinq sous l'mètre!* ("I bet that doesn't cost him more than twenty-five sous a meter"). Cover, *Journal amusant*, October 23, 1886

shoulders, unable to hoist her parasol aloft like the younger women. Above her is the boorish horn player in his summer helmet. In the humor of such figures there is a sting; Seurat manipulates them, like puppets, to make us smile. Elsewhere we see single figures staring out over the water, where Seurat presents an abridged schema of river activity: three sailboats, two steamboats, a fisherman, a racing shell, and, in the distance, a ferry.

Seurat's satirization of contemporary fashion in *La Grande Jatte* was immediately noted in the press. Henry Fèvre's review described "the stiffness of Parisian promenading, formal and shapeless, where even recreation amounts to posing"; for Paul Adam, "even the stiffness of the people, with their cookie-cutter forms, helps give the sound of the modern, the recall of our cramped clothing, glued to our bodies, the reserve of our gestures, the British cant imitated by everyone. We adopt attitudes like those of Memling's people. M. Seurat has perfectly seen, understood, conceived, and translated that with the pure drawing of the primitives."²¹

Contemporary fashion and the primitive were perfectly compatible to Adam and to Seurat's other friends who recognized his ambition to merge contemporary life with timeless elements of style. They also appreciated his ironic interpretation of fashion, which exploits elegance while mocking it. In this Seurat may have been deliberately confronting other artists' hom-

ages to fashion. Manet's *Jeanne, ou le Printemps*, a great success in the Salon of 1882, is a celebration of feminine beauty, fashion, nature, and springtime. The monkey in Seurat's panel of the lone *promeneuse* (cat. no. 133) is a send-up of such a woman, and in the final composition her pretension is reinforced by her arch solemnity. She stands somewhere between Manet's woman and a cartoonlike figure by Grévin. In contrast, Signac's painting of milliners (p. 174), shown in the same room with *La Grande Jatte*, shares Seurat's neo-primitivism, yet because they are workers his women are not on public display and hence not targets of mockery.

Through the juxtaposition of current fashion with the figures' manikin stiffness and their uniformity of presentation Seurat offers us a critical perception of society's artifice, particularly that of the lower classes, who took advantage of cheaper ready-made clothing to mask their true position while consorting with others of higher station.²² This interpretation says, in effect, that Seurat's pictorial pattern, with its repetitive rhythms, is tantamount to actual social conformism; the stiffness and psychological isolation of the figures, however, argue for disjunction, so Seurat is said to engage the viewer in a dialogue of cohesion and separateness. Seurat's people assume roles in a collectivity, yet because they seldom communicate with one another, their actual isolation is revealed. Here we have nothing other than the dilemma of modern urban people under industrial capitalism, analyzed not only by Marx but also by Durkheim, Simmel, and such later thinkers as David Reisman.

This dialogue of cohesion and separateness constitutes the most convincing interpretation of *La Grande Jatte*. For some observers, however, the isolation of Seurat's figures borders on anomie, destroying any sense of social cohesion; the togetherness in the picture becomes merely a superficial mask. According to this interpretation, Seurat uses the apartness of his figures to assert his belief that modern society is disjointed: the picture thus portrays the opposite of a utopia.²³ This view apparently springs from the pessimism of our own generation, for it denies the optimism that Seurat expressed in more than one way. His credo (Appendix E), written in 1890 but surely based on his schoolboy convictions, was "Art is Harmony. Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of similarities." That *La Grande Jatte* embraces both isolation and harmonic integration conforms perfectly to the artist's balancing of dissimilar elements. Moreover, the social relationships in Seurat's painting are no colder than those in Monet's famous *Terrace at Sainte-Adresse* (Metropolitan Museum of Art) or Manet's *Sur la plage de Boulogne* (Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia), where figures line up in twos or threes along similar orthogonals, equally "controlled" by the artist.

The optimism that is expressed through Seurat's ability to organize forms by means of a rational order whose units are made visible further argues against anomie. The irregular brushwork of the Impressionists, for example, seems an outgrowth of romanticism and individualism, as though it were the effortless result of an upper-class elegance. Through its impersonality, Seurat's technique endorsed the social more than the personal, the ordered rather than the irregular, the universal and not the idiosyncratic. He subordinated his painted individuals to the community of forms he constructed, a community in which each image has a determined place.

Once we are accustomed to Seurat's style, we find that his park is characterized not just by order but also by companionship and even by some loving relationships. Social malaise has no place here. No one in the foreground is literally alone; single persons are found only in the middle ground or distance. True, the canoeist is psychologically by himself, but he recalls the boaters in the background, and he is grouped with the top-hatted man and the nearby woman (she may be the top hat's wife; she is certainly no coquette, for her feet are splayed out and she is sewing). On the far right two women sit by a pram, one with her arm around a child; at a slight distance a girl in an orange dress runs across the grass. All others in the foreground are paired up. The center is occupied by two figures who should remove all doubts that this could be a place devoted to scandalous encounters. Both mother and child come toward us, and the child, embodiment of innocence, is the only person who looks directly at us. Beyond her, the two soldiers are companions, as are the two figures reclining in front of them. In the distance at the far right a couple strolls away from us, and nearer, to the left of the running girl, a woman raises her arms to the well-wrapped child her husband holds.²⁴

Upon close inspection the apparent diversity of Seurat's society falls away to reveal a rather narrow band of the social spectrum, mostly lower-middle and middling bourgeois, with perhaps some artisans. The Impressionists had represented a broader range. Renoir, in his famous *Déjeuner des canotiers* (Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) of 1881, included the working children of the restaurant owners, artists' models, artists, journalists, a cavalry officer, and a wealthy collector. By eliminating such diversity Seurat created in *La Grande Jatte* a harmonic middle-class society, an ideal of peaceful leisure signaled by the Sunday of the painting's title. Fénéon, Seurat's foremost interpreter, gave a succinct description of this contemporaneous Cythera: "The subject: the island beneath a scorching sky, at four o'clock, boats slipping along its flanks, stirring with a fortuitous Sunday population enjoying fresh air among the trees."²⁵

Seurat's island society has a long ancestry in the history of art,

although he need not have been emulating any of his forebears: Rubens's *Garden of Love* (Museo del Prado, Madrid); the *fêtes galantes* of the eighteenth century; and innumerable scenes of parkland fairs and picnics. A society "enjoying fresh air," yes, brought up-to-date, with a sense of ordinary behavior (no matter how idealized) that recalls the middle-class Monet more than the upper-class Manet. Monet, in his 1865–66 *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), celebrated the contemporary middle class when he remade Manet's famous *Déjeuner*, whose foursome of artists and nudes had appropriated Renaissance art for the purposes of a provocative elegance. Like Monet, Seurat looked at Manet's picture (it was exhibited in the 1884 retrospective of Manet's work); the three figures in the lower left of Seurat's big composition are probably a half-conscious reworking of the famous painting. However, he made his scene of leisure into a common event, devoid of sexuality, a reserved scene that looks with bemused irony upon middle-class relaxation on a sunny Sunday.

By removing the most mundane aspects of reality (no wine bottles, no picnic debris, and only one worker, the nurse), by eliminating conflict although admitting contrast, by generating memorable types rooted in current fashions, Seurat created an allegory of summer, a procession of moderns that he hoped would give him the rank of Phidias. His satiric wit gave him the distance from his contemporaries that he needed in order to treat them like puppets and spared him the ponderous weight the term "classical" sometimes evokes. The same wit separates his picture from Monet's and Renoir's paintings of leisure-seekers; we can find pleasure in their images, but never Seurat's humor, tinged as it is with his distinctive brand of mockery.

Seurat's huge picture has been granted the status of a classic in the twentieth century, so he achieved his goal. *La Grande Jatte* has become the most commonly reproduced painting for advertisers and designers who wish to evoke summer leisure, uncontaminated by work and worry. Its decorative clarity lends itself to graphic reproduction, and its satirical edge—its finely tuned irony—entertains as much as it instructs. It is a suburban arcadia, a neatly planned harmony in which amusement cohabits with relaxation, and irony with approbation, both in the picture's images and in our reaction to them. It does not demean the picture to recognize its appeal to designers of commercial publicity, whose use of it proves its reciprocity with the traditions of popular culture.

1. Fénéon, September 1886. Rewald's account of Fénéon's role in 1886 (Rewald 1948) has been greatly expanded in Halperin 1988, pp. 92ff.

2. Thanks to the careful detective work of Inge Fiedler, conservation scientist at the Art Institute of Chicago, we now know that the unstable agent Seurat used is zinc yellow, which he mixed with both

- green and red (Fiedler 1989). Fénéon (1892) specified the visible changes mentioned, and in the same year three other critics lamented the alterations (Arnay 1892, Christophe 1892, Demolder 1892). According to Signac (who apparently confused repaints on *La Grande Jatte* with those on the *Baignade*), these colors were made by a certain "Édouard" (diary entry of December 29, 1894, in Signac Journal, ed. J. Rewald, p. 114). It was apparently Pissarro who recommended "Édouard" to Seurat and to Signac. Fénéon annotated the verso of a photograph of Signac's *Le Petit-Andely* (Fénéon sale, Drouot, Paris, December 4, 1941, no. 8) as follows: "Peint en avril 1886 avec des couleurs Édouard. Repeint en mai 1898 avec des couleurs Blockx" (photograph, formerly collection Gina Doveil, Saint-Ouen).
3. De Hauke lists thirty panels, but two (H 108 and 116) are definitely not studies for the big picture, and the authenticity of one (H 136) should be questioned. Of the twenty-eight drawings listed, one (H 623) is of doubtful authenticity.
 4. Because none of the panels has the facture of paintings produced in pictures of 1885 and none is an excerpt of the final composition, we should abandon the supposition that some were done in 1885.
 5. Fénéon, June 1886.
 6. He also gave Fénéon advice on color theory and wrote the dealer Durand-Ruel in phraseology that reads like a scientific handbook. For Pissarro's views of "romantic" and "scientific" impressionism, see his letters from May 1886 through February 1887.
 7. Letter of January 8, 1887, in CP, ed. Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 2, no. 374.
 8. "Exposition Puvis de Chavannes," *La revue indépendante* 6 (1888): 142. In this article Kahn made a parallel between Puvis and Seurat (as "un des jeunes novateurs impressionnistes"), stating that each were innovators, Puvis in line, Seurat in color, and that they shared "hiératisme" and "synthèse." Kahn later acknowledged Seurat's dissension from the parallel in *Silhouettes littéraires* (1925), p. 112. Pissarro protested against Kahn's admiration of Puvis in the letter cited in the preceding note.
 9. Fénéon, May 1887.
 10. Signac, interviewed by Gustave Coquiot on July 8, 1923, recorded in the manuscript for Coquiot 1924, formerly in the archives of Dr. Jean Sutter.
 11. For example, Longhi 1950 and Boime 1965.
 12. For example, Kate Greenaway was invoked in Javel, May 1886, colored engravings in Fourcaud 1886, wooden toys and tapestries in Maus 1886. Because Egyptian art was invoked in many reviews of 1886 and 1887, including several by Seurat's friends, it is tempting to think that these references sprang from conversations among the critics and painters grouped around the Société des Artistes Indépendants.
 13. Schapiro 1935, p. 12.
 14. Pissarro's phrase, referring to his *Vue de ma fenêtre par temps gris* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) shown in the May-June exhibition (that is, the last Impressionist exhibition) is in a letter to Lucien of July 30, 1886, in John Rewald, ed., *Camille Pissarro, lettres à son fils Lucien* (1950), p. 109. The relevant sentence (portions were inadvertently omitted in CP, ed. Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 2, no. 348) reads: "Il paraît que le sujet n'est pas de vente à cause du toit rouge et la basse-cour, justement ce qui donne tout le caractère à cette toile, qui a un cachet *primitif moderne*" (It seems that the subject didn't sell because of the red roof and the poultry yard, just what gives character to this canvas, which has the cachet of modern primitive).
 15. "Primitive art and popular art, which is the continuation of primitive art in the contemporary world, are symbolic in this fashion. Popular broadsides only draw outlines. In the perfection of their craft, ancient painters used this technique. And so too, Japanese art," from Édouard Dujardin, "Aux XX et aux Indépendants—Le cloisonnisme," *La revue indépendante*, xxx (May 19, 1888), significantly reprinted in Alfred Jarry's review *Perhinderion*, 2 (June 1896), along with an essay on "Imagerie populaire."
 16. House 1980, House 1989, Clark 1984, and Clayson 1989 discuss the two pictures in terms of the contrast between workers' Monday ("saint lundi," when workers stayed away from their jobs) with Sunday leisure. House makes the paintings into pendants, with rather forced interrelationships; Clark offers a more circumspect and convincing reading of the paintings but exaggerates the range of social class portrayed in *La Grande Jatte*; Clayson equates the *Baignade* with "saint lundi" and its typically male world, *La Grande Jatte* with Sunday, characterized more by women and children than by men or whole families. To the extent that "saint lundi" is concerned, these comparisons are hard to accept, for the *Baignade* has none of the carousing that is the identifying feature of that ritual. Ward 1986 deals effectively with the difficulty of identifying the social class of Seurat's figures from contemporary reviews of the spring exhibition.
 17. 1872 ed., p. 347.
 18. This aspect of the island of La Grande Jatte is perceptively treated by T. J. Clark (1984).
 19. An anonymous writer for *The Bat* (London), May 25, 1886. Could this woman be a prostitute? And could the fisherwoman on the other side also be a prostitute? These identifications have recently been widely accepted (Thomson 1985, Thomson 1989, Eisenman 1989); even the reclining figures in front of the two cadets have been called promiscuous women whom the soldiers are ogling! The idea that the fisherwoman is a prostitute depends upon analogies with cartoonists who exploited the homophonous pun, *pêcher* (to fish) for *pécher* (to sin). Such puns, however, depend upon a context of flaunted sexuality that is entirely absent from Seurat's figure, who is, moreover, accompanied by a woman. Dozens of illustrations in journals and a large number of Salon pictures show women fishing (so, too, did Daubigny), without a hint of impropriety. There is perhaps more reason to debate whether or not the *promeneuse* is a tart, for she is accompanied by a monkey, sometimes the emblem of profligacy. Seurat's friends among artists and writers nowhere mention the woman as a prostitute in their private letters and diaries, where they could speak without inhibition and neither do Signac or Kahn, who wrote of Seurat's social convictions shortly after his death. Furthermore, in the Goncourts' *Manette Salomon*, the monkey "Vermillon," an important resident of Coriolis's studio, is never given the attributes of lust.
 20. This nurse has entered confusingly into the analysis of *La Grande Jatte*. In Thomson 1985, Nochlin 1989, and elsewhere she is called a wet nurse and extensive analogies are drawn with nurses who breast-feed infants, their military lovers, and so on. This woman, however, is simply a nurse caring for the elderly woman next to her.
 21. Fèvre 1886 and Adam, May 1886, both among the reviews in Seurat's argus (de Hauke archives). The association of fashion with high art was common in this era. Huysmans, writing in 1886, said that dressmakers' dummies were infinitely superior to Greek art and that when one saw them, Greek art ceased to exist. ("Croquis parisiens," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8 [1929], pp. 137-40.)
 22. This analysis was persuasively made in an unpublished lecture of 1983 by Leila Kinney but is best known from its development by T. J. Clark (1984).
 23. Ernst Bloch, reading the stiffness of Seurat's figures in purely negative terms, qualified *La Grande Jatte* as a non-utopia: *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Berlin, 3 vols., 1954), vol. 2, pp. 393-94. His view has been opposed by O. K. Werckmeister in *Ende der Aesthetik* (Frankfurt, 1971), pp. 50ff., and more recently by Albert Boime (1990), who sees the picture as bearing out the anarchist conception of utopia. Bloch has found support in Linda Nochlin's recent essay (1989), in which she accuses Seurat's figures of "dehumanizing rigidity" and "monotony," with implications of "alienation" and "anomie."
 24. The existence in the picture of only this one intact family has prompted speculation on why Seurat's crowd is dominated by nonfamily groupings and why there are more women than men (Clayson 1989). It should be noted, however, that Seurat was observing many of the conventions of paintings of leisure, which in turn probably reflect the actual composition of holiday societies that artists could observe. In Dubourg's beach scene, for example, there is not a single nuclear family, and few men; in Monet's *Parc Monceau* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 59.142) there is only one man.
 25. Fénéon, June 1886, also in Fénéon, October 1886.